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Eggs

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EGGS

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EGGS

RACHEL STALLARD

ABSTRACT

Written for a young adolescent audience, *Eggs* attempts to mimic author Jude Blume who uses humor and creative story-telling to help children and their parents confront and discuss serious issues. *Eggs* is a coming of age story that uses a family's pet iguana eggs to symbolize the transformation of the Baugh family—Dirk, the father, and his two children, Amanda and Adam—following the unexpected death of their mother. As the eggs continue to develop throughout the story, so do the relationships between the father and his new love, Paige as well as the daughter Amanda and her high school sweetheart, Troy. When the eggs finally hatch, the characters experience a rebirth of their family life. Not only a life without their mother, but one that opens up to the possibility of the father remarrying.

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CHAPTER

INTRODUCTION

Writing has always been personal to me. It's a way for me to articulate how I feel about a certain challenge or situation. Authors of "Working for Judith Shakespeare: A Study in Feminism," Jane Varley and Aimee Broe Erdman, agree. They spent several months studying the works of different women writers to determine how personal perspectives and experiences are woven into literary and theoretical meanings. One conclusion drawn at the end of their study is this: "Reading and writing are autobiographical. Our own stories emerge, in the study of literature" (280).

As a writer, even in crafting a fictional piece, there are definite truths and real life characters woven into my story. I think this personal tie is what makes the setting, characters and plot so believable. And because the people and places are so realistic, it creates a more meaningful experience for the reader. The details provide a unique insight into the story and allow the reader to connect on a deeper level.

I remember connecting to my first book at the age of 10. Judy Blume's *The Pain and The Great One* was a Christmas gift from my parents. The book is told from

two different perspectives: the older sibling's and the younger sibling's. The eight-year old sister—"The Great one"—is deeply annoyed by her spoiled, messy, immature six-year-old brother. She can't understand why her parents love him more than her. When I flipped through the section written from the perspective of the "Great One," I truly felt that the author was speaking from my point of view. Her writing was spot on. She really understood how I felt about my mess of a younger sister.

In *The Pain and The Great One*, as well as the majority of Blume's other writings, she bases the characters on the lives of her own two children, Randy and Larry. On the author's website, she writes that watching them interact and struggle first-hand gives her unique insight to the situations her readers face. She understands what is important to them and how someone their age—her reader's age—would cope. While her stories are funny and the characters quirky, she uses these settings to deliver a deeper message. Each story helps her readers deal with real life issues such as a sibling, a bully or a grumpy teacher. However, she crafts the story in such a fun and entertaining way that the reader usually doesn't notice that Blume is teaching them a very important lesson as they flip through the pages.

When I read *The Pain and The Great One* I was unaware that Blume was using a funny story to tackle the more serious issue of sibling rivalry and favoritism. But by the end of the book, I felt a little differently about my younger sister. After reading the perspective written by "The Pain," it was clear that my sister also felt the same way I did. She not only found me equally odd and annoying, but she most likely felt our parents considered me their favorite. From then on, I looked at our

relationship a little differently. Blume's story helped me deal with something that, as a child, I would have had a difficult time articulating to my parents.

My goal in writing *Eggs* is to do the same. I use creative story-telling and humor to approach a relevant and delicate subject facing my young adolescent audience: the loss of a parent. According to divorcerate.org, the current divorce rate in America is 41%. While divorce is not the same as the death of a parent, to a child, the split of his or her parents feels like an overwhelming loss. Whatever contributes to the loss of one parent, the child will eventually deal with his or her parent meeting someone new. While the characters in my story have lost their mother, the main conflict in the story revolves around the father, Dirk Baugh, dating someone new.

Like Blume, I use a personal experiences to jump start my story. My husband Nick has a twin sister named Mandy. When they were in middle school his iguana laid eggs in her bed. Like the Mandy is my story, his sister was incredibly disgusted by the scene. While Nick's iguana eggs did not survive, I liked the idea of using the eggs to symbolize a transition for my main character Mandy. The first transition being her father's new relationship with his girlfriend Paige and the second being Mandy's budding relationship with the high school quarterback, Troy.

As one would expect with a big transition, the person dealing with it needs time to think and process—much like the incubation period of an egg. Just as the two relationships make Mandy anxious and uncomfortable, the eggs also create conflict for her as well. They are messy, while she is clean. She doesn't care for animals, but there is no space for them in her brother's room; so Mandy is forced to allow them into her personal space until they hatch. By the end of the story, the iguanas are

breaking out of their shells just as Mandy finally begins to open up to the possibility of her father loving a new woman.

Aside from symbolism, I use elements that young adults can identify with to create a story that is easy for them to digest. One of those elements is high school football. It sets the stage for Mandy and Troy to connect during their first interview, but the winning season also makes for an interesting read. The Halloween dance and snowboarding trip with cousins are also other elements that keep the story moving and the reader entertained. The first kiss between Troy and Mandy is also a situation that most adolescents are faced with before or while they're attending high school.

For me, the most challenging relationship in the story to predict was the relationship between Mandy and Paige. Most of my family and friends are not divorced nor have they lost a parent. So I based the conflict with Paige off of my close friend Denise and her two step-children, Ashley and Nick. Denise and I discussed what it was like when the kids' mother left and how they handled a new woman coming into their father's life. Like Paige, Denise is a huge animal lover which is something that created an immediate bond between her and the younger son. While Ashley was a teenager and more resistant, their relationship grew over time and a great deal of breathing room built between them. Rather than the father forcing them to spend time together, he allowed the two of them space to get used to the new environment. I took the same slow-moving approach with Paige and Mandy.

Other "research" I conducted was around high school football. Since the story is based in Cedar Rapids, I pulled and compared different high school football schedules to match up the timeline for practice and the eventual championship. I also

spent a good amount of time on different websites that outline breeding, incubating and hatching baby iguana eggs. There was no set in stone method, so I erred on the average.

In closing, *Eggs* is a realistic and light-hearted story that is written to appeal to a young adolescent audience. Those that read it will hopefully learn to trust the characters so they can learn from their actions. While they might not realize it at the time, my goal as a writer is to connect with each reader to help them feel they are not alone in dealing with the loss in the life.

EGGS

“Daaadd.” Leaning over her bed and pulling back her pink, white and lime-green polka dot comforter, Mandy began to uncover the strange lump in the middle of her bed.

“Dad!!!” She was gripping its corner like an old band-aid, afraid of ripping it off too quickly, as a long, round white object the size of a large almond came into view.

“Dirk Baugh! Upstairs now!” When Mandy really wanted her father’s attention she called him by his first and last names. It drove him crazy which guaranteed a quick response 98% of the time.

She heard his heavy footsteps making their way up the wooden stairs. Dirk rounded the corner, stopping abruptly in her bedroom doorway. Frantically surveying the scene for any signs of danger, he nervously ran his fingers through his thick black hair.

“What—.” He was out of breath. “What is it?!” The front of his grey t-shirt was wet from sweat and covered in flour. She could tell he was in the midst of one of his ‘great bakery sensations.’

“There’s flour in your hair.” Mandy laughed, keeping her steady grip on the comforter.

“And?” Her father threw his arms up in the air. “That’s what you were screaming about?”

Mandy motioned with her free hand to the underneath of her covers.

“Something’s in there.” She was whispering now.

Dirk slowly approached the bed, craning his neck to investigate the mystery. Lifting the comforter just high enough to unveil the hidden objects, he reached forward with his right hand to pick one up. Making a cup with his fingers to protect it from the open air, he pulled one of the objects out from the covers and held it at eye level. Then he drew it to his nostrils and inhaled.

“Smells okay.” Opening his palm, Dirk lowered the damp white object to his daughter’s height. “I think it’s an egg.”

Mandy squinted and held her breath as she willed herself to take a closer look. A neat freak that learned how to use a vacuum at the age of four, the thought of a creature laying eggs in her pristine bed made her stomach turn.

“Are there more?” Trying to maintain her composure, she grimaced at Dirk and pointed under the covers again.

Dirk placed the egg on Mandy’s bright pink area rug, and then took hold of the comforter.

“Let me handle this.” He could tell by the expression on his daughter’s face there was a good chance she was going to throw up.

Mandy didn’t usually lose her cool. Out of Dirk’s two children, and himself, she was the most even-keeled. However, there were two things that rattled her: a messy room and anything with fur or scales.

As he pulled back the comforter, eleven more leathery eggs were revealed.

“I think I’m gonna—.” With her hand over her mouth, Mandy quickly left the bedroom.

“What’s she all freaked out about?” Adam gingerly entered his 15 year old sister’s room. He’d already taken his shoes off and was careful not to touch anything. Mandy had made it clear many times that he was not to enter her room without her permission. Ever. Or else. But Adam didn’t normally need a verbal threat to keep him from going into her room. No seven year old boy wanted to surround himself with pepto bismol pink walls and flowery pillows.

Dirk was kneeling on the floor when Adam approached. He was leaning over Mandy’s bed, removing tiny white objects from under the comforter and placing them on her precious pink fur carpet.

“Hey buddy.” Acknowledging his son, Dirk continued to look around Mandy’s room for something to contain the eggs. “Grab me a shoe box from the hall closet.”

Adam heard running water as he passed the bathroom he shared with his sister. Whatever his father wanted to put in the box had grossed her out so much she was taking a shower for the second time that day.

As Adam re-entered Mandy’s room and approached the objects resting in the center of the rug, his stomach began to drop. He’d seen those types of eggs before on the Discovery Channel. They were just the right size for baby iguana eggs. And Adam just happened to have two pet iguanas, both of which were male. Or so he had been told by the teenager working at Pet Plus when he picked them out for his birthday.

“Promise.” Mandy said, taking a deep breath to steady her voice. “I won’t be mad.”

She could tell Adam was on the verge of tears and didn’t want to push him over the edge.

“Just tell me how you think they got in my bed.”

The eat-in kitchen table was covered with a large BBQ chicken pizza from Tony’s Place, a dozen garlic wings, and a side order of cinnamon rolls. Dirk wasn’t big on buying baked goods from fast food joints, but he hoped they’d serve as a peace offering for the siblings.

The three of them had agreed to sit down at the table like a civilized family to talk through the situation. Regardless of how the eggs ended up in Mandy’s bed, they needed to decide what to do with them.

Dirk knew Mandy didn’t like animals, but she did like reading and researching new things. Following in her mother’s footsteps, she was a reporter for her school’s newspaper. He thought she could help her little brother research how to care for the eggs. The two of them seemed to be moving to opposite ends of the earth since their mother died a little over two years ago.

“Maybe you two could work together.” Dirk said, breaking the silence and cold stares between the siblings. “Like that animal rescue team on TV.”

“*Team?*” Mandy let the word out long and slow. “How are we supposed to be a team”—inserting air quotes to emphasize the word again—“if he won’t even tell me what really happened.”

Adam exhibited his anxiety by pushing around the untouched wings on his plate. They were one of his top three favorite foods, but tonight he didn't feel like eating. He hated fighting with his sister.

"Goliath was just sleeping when I found him." Adam's voice cracked as he began to explain.

"He wasn't even on your bed."

Then the tears started welling up in his eyes.

"He was only missing for two seconds."

Adam's voiced trailed off as he looked down and pinched his eyes shut.

Mandy took another deep breath. She could feel Dirk's eyes staring at the side of her face, willing her to make Adam feel better. Since their mom died, she had assumed the caregiver role of 'everything's going to be just fine' whenever Adam was upset. After she took a moment to calm down it hit her: *she* was the one making him cry this time. And big sisters were supposed to take care of their little brothers. The black and white newspaper photo of Becca Pinkerton sitting in her hospital bed, arms wrapped around her baby brother, popped into Mandy's head.

Becca had been one of her mother's last feature stories for the local newspaper. Kylie started writing articles for the *Gazette* shortly after she and Dirk were married. For years she wrote about new buildings, art shows, and other Cedar Rapid's feature events. But after she was diagnosed with cancer, Kylie's stories became more personal.

Every Sunday she'd feature an interview with a local hero that was making a difference by volunteering at the hospital or helping raise money for families who lost

their jobs or homes. Becca Pinkerton pulled her four year old brother out of their burning house. In the process, her hair caught on fire and she lost one of her ears. But she was so happy that her little brother was okay a huge smile covered her face in the newspaper photo. Becca was only nine at the time.

Mandy tucked her long blonde hair behind her ears and leaned forward to open the box of cinnamon rolls.

“Well,” she said, putting one on her little brother’s plate. “I can print off some stuff on my laptop.” She pushed the plate close to Adam’s chest. “But I’ll need help sorting it all out.”

Adam slowly lifted his head to look at his sister. “I can help.”

“That’s a great idea!” Satisfied his little plan was coming together Dirk clapped his hands and leaned back in his seat. “Better stock up.” He nodded toward Adam’s undisturbed plate. “You got a long night ahead of you.”

Using the printed photos from her online research as a guide, Mandy poked holes in the top of the Tupperware container. Adam watched intently as she carefully positioned it on top of two bricks inside the new 20-gallon aquarium they’d purchased at a 24-hour Walmart. The container rested above several inches of water, creating a humid environment for the delicate eggs.

“Alright.” She said, sticking a waterproof thermometer to the side of the tank so they could monitor the temperature. “It needs to stay right at 86 degrees.”

Mandy looked closely at the homemade incubator she had created, comparing it one last time to the photos, ensuring everything was in its place. After securing the lid, she flicked on the overhead heat lamp.

“How long will it take?” Adam sat at Mandy’s desk, resting his head on his hands so he could watch the eggs for a while.

There wasn’t room on his desk for two aquariums, so that meant Mandy had to let the creatures live in her room until they hatched. It was a compromise that came only after Dirk promised her a new pair of jeans. The ones with rhinestones embroidering the pockets. *And* the matching belt.

“It says right here.” She pointed to the highlighted sentence on her stack of printed papers. “The incubation period—that’s how long they have to grow inside the eggs—is between 60 and 90 days.” Mandy put the sheets down on the desk and rested her hands on Adam’s shoulders. “So...they should hatch just after Thanksgiving.”

His breaths became long and heavy. She felt his head turn on its side as he fell asleep sitting upright, his face just inches from the tank. Guiding Adam gently out of the chair, Mandy walked her exhausted brother to his bed and tucked him in.

It was a half hour after midnight, but Mandy wasn’t ready to hit the sack just yet. All the last-minute reading and building had made her hungry. She turned the light out in Adam’s room and headed downstairs. As her feet touched the bottom steps, she heard music coming from the kitchen. It wasn’t a band she recognized. There was a guitar,

maybe two, and a guy singing in a slow, low voice. She thought the voice sounded oddly familiar but she couldn't place it.

"How's the queen?" Dirk filled a tray full of tiny cream puffs with a hand-held tool. He didn't look up when Mandy entered the room.

"Hungry." Mandy pulled out the box of leftover pizza from the fridge. "What are you listening to?"

"Buck." Dirk said as he picked up another squeeze tool and began coating the pastries with a layer of chocolate. "Big guy, wears a lot of camo. We went duck hunting two years ago."

"*Three* years ago." Mandy corrected her father. She remembered because it was the last trip he took right before her mom got sick. From the time she went to the doctor for a horrible pain in her back, to the day that she passed away just five months later, Dirk only left her side to shower and brush his teeth.

"You're right." He put down the chocolate frosting.

Dirk looked at his daughter finishing off her second slice of cold pizza. She was beginning to look more like her mother: blonde, green eyes, legs a mile long that made her taller than most of the girls and intimidated the boys in her class. She was incredibly thin, despite her bottomless appetite. He wondered where she put all that food.

"What do ya think?"

"About Buck?" Midchew, with a mouthful of pizza, Mandy gave her dad an honest answer. "He's awful."

“He is, isn’t he.” Dirk laughed, shaking his head as he set aside his baking project to join his daughter.

Mandy examined her father from across the table. He was wearing a faded University of Iowa t-shirt, her mom’s alma mater. His hair still had flour in it, but now the white powder also covered his arms and caked his fingernails. The circles under his eyes were a darker grey than usual. She guessed his top secret project for the Annual Cake and Shake was keeping him up pretty late.

“Really dude, you should totally get an apron.”

“Like OMG, totally for real.” Dirk mocked his teenage daughter. He loved when she let her guard down. When she acted her own age.

Mandy was an old soul. She was smart, mature, extremely organized—a trait she didn’t get from either parent—and, given the circumstances, had grown up a little faster than most kids her age. He forgot sometimes that she was really just a teenager.

“Seriously.” Her mouth was empty and her tone no longer joking. “You’re never going to get a date if you walk around looking like the Pillsbury Dough Boy.”

“Come on.” Dirk smiled widely, his dimples making him look like a little boy. “You know you’re the only girl for me.”

Mandy rolled her eyes and closed the empty pizza box. Dirk sensed her old soul taking over her teenage body.

“Do you ever think about it?” She began as she took a long sip of her lemon-lime Gatorade. “Getting married again?”

Dirk was silent, looking down at the salt shaker he was spinning in-between his hands.

Her eyes locked on her father, Mandy took a couple more swigs of her drink, giving him a chance to respond. He didn't say a word.

"You promised mom you'd try."

Still fixated on the salt shaker, Dirk silently nodded his head. He stared at his cracked floured hands, flashing back to the first handshake between him and his wife Kylie. She was maid of honor in a wedding who had come to meet the bride-to-be at his bakery to sample different cakes. Her fingers were smooth and delicate, painted with a perfect French manicure as she reached out to shake Dirk's messy hand. The bride got caught up at work and never made the tasting, so Dirk and Kylie spent the next four hours eating seven, green and white various flavored mini cakes.

For each anniversary, Dirk baked the same tiny desserts to replicate their first date. They would meet downtown at his bakery, The Frost King. Dirk would flip the closed sign so he and Kylie could catch up for a while without the kids interrupting.

Sensing her father was lost in thought, Mandy decided to change the subject.

"If you need a taste-tester--," she waited until he looked up then began rubbing her flat tummy. "There's still some room in here."

Sunday was a regular Sunday. The family was running ten minutes late for church. Dirk hadn't worn his dress shoes since last weekend and couldn't remember where he put them. As Mandy helped him look, she accidentally spilt red Gatorade on her light green dress and had to run upstairs to change. And, Adam realized on his way out the door that he'd forgotten to put on underwear.

No matter how late they were for church, Adam always insisted on sitting up front so he could watch the drummer during the contemporary songs. Sixteen years old, with blonde shaggy hair cut an inch above his shoulders, Shane was Adam's counselor at Vacation Bible School. Mandy thought he was pretty dorky until a couple months ago, when he got contacts and showed up on Sunday without his glasses.

Most of the people in the choir were older than her grandma, so she didn't mind sitting in front of Shane for the hour-long service. After politely asking an elderly woman in a motorized scooter if she could back up to let them pass, the family took their seats in the third row just to the left of the stage.

Pastor Raniky joined the choir on stage for the last song. Mandy knew the words by heart, so she began to look around. She watched her Dad lean forward and squint at the electronic screen hanging at the front of the church. He was trying to read the words to the song. She knew this because he made that same face when he drove at night which made her extremely nervous. But after years of badgering from her mother and now Mandy, Dirk denied having any vision problems. Ironically, he was the one who took Adam to the optometrist immediately after his son missed a fly baseball in the outfield and was clocked in the face.

Mandy examined the old women in the front row of the choir. They were all wearing royal blue robes with white satin V-necks. She tried to imagine the patterns on their dresses underneath. She scanned the stage, stopping on Pastor Raniky's lips as he sang. She was pretty sure he didn't know the words to the song. Either that or he had absolutely no rhythm.

As her eyes drifted to the right of the stage, they were eventually met by a new boy she hadn't seen before. Though, 'boy' didn't seem to suit him. His shoulders were broad and muscular, stretching his black and yellow letterman jacket to a point where he could no longer fasten the bronze snaps. He stood as if posing for a magazine: chest out, legs wide, chin slightly tilted up. Not only did he appear to be completely full of himself, but his piercing blue eyes and thick jet black hair actually made him look like an Abercrombie model. He noticed Mandy examining him and flashed a huge smile across his face. She immediately looked down at her feet.

Pastor Raniky made a few announcements about an upcoming bake sale, try-outs for the Christmas play and then asked the congregation if there were any special prayer requests. Mandy saw Adam's hand dart up towards the ceiling. His fingers outstretched and eager like a cheerleader's. She became uneasy and then completely terrified of what might come out of his mouth. Sure they prayed before eating and bedtime, but that was more of a routine encouraged by their mother. Certainly his request could wait until they were in the privacy of their own home.

"Yes, young man." The Pastor's eyes connected with Adam's bouncing hand. "God's ears are listening."

As Adam stood in the pew, Mandy began to sink slowly in her seat.

"My iguana's David and Goliath," he paused to correct himself. "Well one of them is a girl, but I'm not sure which one so I'm not gonna change their names."

There was a murmur of laughter. The Pastor waited patiently for Adam to continue.

"One of them had baby eggs in my sister's bed."

The Pastor nodded, apparently sensing there was more to the story. Mandy sank a couple inches lower.

“I’d like to pray that the babies don’t die.” Several ‘how darling’ and ‘precious’ lifted from the congregation. Thinking he was finally finished, the knots in Mandy’s stomach began to unwind. And then, to her complete horror, Adam continued.

“Their names are Crock...Oscar...Al...”

As her brother continued for what seemed like an eternity to list the given names of all twelve eggs, Mandy couldn’t bring herself to look up from the pew. But she could see the mystery guy’s smile illuminating from the corner of her eye.

Dirk squeezed Adam reassuringly as he finished and sat down in his seat. Mandy, a full head below the pew, thought about the lady in the motorized scooter. She wanted to knock her off, jump on the bike, and hit the gas until she was at least three states away.

The bell rang, breaking Mandy’s trance. For the last ten minutes of class, she’d been staring at the glossy eight by ten photo of Troy Gladden in his No. 7 Viking football uniform. He was her newest assignment for the school paper. And, to her complete demise, the mystery guy from church.

“A sophomore transfer from Olympic Academy,” Mrs. Henkel had briefed her twelve journalism students at the beginning of class. “He came here to get more

playing time.” She was nearing Mandy’s desk as she read aloud. “Let’s find out if he’s the big star he’s cracked up to be.”

Mrs. Henkel was a large woman whose temper was as hot as her fiery red hair. She’d been an editor at the same paper as Mandy’s mother and had decided to quit when the company passed her up for Editor-in-Chief. Unable to find another job, she started the journalism class at Viking High and ran her classroom like a boot camp for wannabe reporters. She took her job a little too seriously, but that didn’t bother Mandy.

Surprised, nervous and excited about the newest assignment that landed on her desk, Mandy tucked the picture into her journalism folder and headed to fifth period. She was still a little groggy from the lack of sleep over the weekend. So she didn’t notice the door swing open to her right and release a flurry of students. Someone hit her full speed, knocking her Science book and folder out of her arms. They slid across the floor three feet in front of her. In the process, Troy’s picture slipped out of the folder, his forehead and eyes peering from the top as it landed near someone’s sneakers in front of a row of lockers.

“Heyyyy.” The hands belonging to the grey and white Nikes knelt down to retrieve the discarded schoolbooks. “Is that me?”

Mandy felt physically ill and several inches shorter as she watched the Viking’s new star quarterback pick up her personal effects, including his own glossy photo. She prayed he wouldn’t recognize her from church.

“Yes.” Mandy pulled the book and folder out of his hand and reached for the photo. “It’s for a—”

Troy yanked it out of her reach before she could finish.

“Wait a minute.” He began, piecing together the familiar face. “You’re the lizard girl from church.”

“Very funny.” Jumping in-between words, Mandy tried desperately to grab the photo.

“Don’t you want me to autograph it first?” He smiled slowly, looking down at Mandy, revealing two rows of perfectly straight white teeth as he proceeded to hold the photo above his head. In the opposite arm, Troy held four hardbound textbooks at his side with ease.

Unlike the other boys in Mandy’s grade, Troy was taller than her by at least three inches. As he hovered the picture out of her reach, he could tell that she was beyond embarrassed, and this delighted him.

“No thanks.” She stretched her long legs high enough to match his height, and—with a quick jump—snatched the photo out of his meaty hand. As she leaned toward him she caught a whiff of his musky cologne.

“Man, you’re good.” Impressed by her quick reflexes and feisty personality, Troy could tell she was a challenge. And he liked that immediately. “Are you a basketball player?”

“Journalist.” Mandy refused to make eye contact and instead concentrated on getting her books in order. “I’m supposed to interview you for the *Viking Times*.”

“Sounds important.” Troy cocked his head, trying to force Mandy into eye contact.

She took a deep breathe and met his gaze. Her light eyes were narrow, the skin above her nose pinched indicating she was annoyed with him. It was a response Troy wasn't used to getting from teenage girls. His previous girlfriend at Olympic was head cheerleader and two years older. He'd broken up with her right before the move to Viking High, so he could focus on football. And the fresh crop of girls.

"Seriously." He tried to win the new girl over. Flipping open his notebook, he held out a pen as if he was eager to take notes. "When do you wanna talk?"

Mandy began walking towards her next class. Troy followed.

"Mrs. Henkel already worked it out with Coach," she said.

The warning bell rang meaning the students had 30 seconds to make it to class without a tardy. Mandy trotted to the door of her fifth period Biology class and yanked it open.

"Tomorrow after practice." She yelled over her shoulder.

As the door closed, its narrow window framed a stunned Troy Gladden still standing in the hallway, his mouth hanging slightly open. A quarterback who was used to calling the shots, he'd just been sacked by one of the scariest—and cutest—girls he'd ever met.

The smell was overwhelming. It hit Mandy's lips and made her mouth dry as soon as she opened her bedroom door.

She'd plugged in a scented air freshener under her desk to conceal the smell of damp, baby iguana eggs. But the liquid pourpurri mixed with the humid tank emitted an odor of rotting roses.

Holding her breath, Mandy reached for the purple portable fan she kept hidden on a shelf at the top of her closet. It didn't match the color theme of her room so she kept it tucked away with other items that didn't quite fit into her life anymore. She wasn't a pack rat. The items on this shelf were spared from the Goodwill pile solely because they held some meaning for Mandy. The fan, for example, was from her childhood bedroom in the first house she lived in with her mom and dad. Before Adam was born. That house didn't have air conditioning, so Mandy was lulled to sleep every night by the rotating arms of Tinkerbelle. She hoped tonight the fairy could work her magic to remove the deadly scent.

As she yanked down the fan, its cord caught a square object on the back of the shelf launching it to the ground. She heard glass break as it landed on the wood floor near her dark green converse. Even though it was face down, she could tell it was a picture frame. Knowing the image captured on the other side made her hesitate before flipping it over.

Slowly she lifted it from the broken shards to reveal a color photo of her mother and herself. In the photo, a six year old Mandy was dressed in a white ballet uniform with silver sequins and pink and purple bows. The matching tutu wasn't in the shot, but Mandy remembered the billowing chiffon sprinkled with more silver sequins. In the snapshot, she was facing her mother who was applying pink lipstick, as Mandy pursed her lips. It was the evening of her first-grade ballet recital.

Although it was only a profile shot of her mother's healthy, colorful face, the image sent a sharp pain through Mandy's chest. The tears immediately followed.

"Are you okay?" Adam's voice was low and nervous.

Hearing the crash he had abandoned his Animal Planet show to check on his big sister. He was standing in the doorway not entirely sure if he should enter Mandy's room. Not because of her neat freak rules, but because he could tell she was crying. It wasn't something she did in front of him. In fact, he wasn't sure she ever cried. Not since their mother's funeral.

"Yeah." She hurriedly wiped the tears from her face. "I'm fine."

Mandy quickly shoved the picture in between some sweaters on a lower shelf.

"Is that mom?" Adam said as he stepped into the room.

Her back still to her brother, Mandy took a deep breath. She knew he'd been standing there long enough to have seen the picture. And she didn't see the point in making up a story conceal the truth. Sliding it out from its hiding spot, she held the image with both hands and turned to face her brother.

"I was about your age when this was taken." She took a step forward, handing over the broken frame.

"You look funny." Adam laughed at Mandy's puckered lips. He was too young to remember his mother looking so healthy. So alive.

She was relieved the image didn't upset her little brother.

"I gotta clean this up." She said, making her way past Adam who was still holding the picture and giggling to himself. Mandy was glad the broken glass gave her an excuse to get out of the room.

“Okay fish lips.” Pleased with his comment Adam laughed out loud to himself.

But Mandy couldn’t respond. As she headed down the stairs to find a broom the tears ran down her cheeks and neck. There was no way she could stop them this time.

She slipped inside the closet under the stairs and pulled the door closed. Leaning against the wall, she slid to the floor and pulled her knees to her chest. As the sobs began to shake her body she tucked her head in-between her legs and chest to hide the noise. Concealed inside the tiny space crammed with cleaning supplies, Mandy finally let herself turn into a complete mess.

Coach’s whistle cut through the crisp, mid-September air. Mandy had been watching the last 40 minutes of Viking varsity football practice to “research” Troy’s ability for her story.

Sitting on the second row of the cool metal bleachers, she could taste the leather, sweat and wet grass lifting from the field. She found the after school drills to be quite...musical. The rhythm of pounding cleats gliding back and forth up and down the field, almost always in sync like a dance routine. It amazed her that such huge bodies could move so quickly and with such precision on the field, because many of those same boys stumbled around the hallways like Neanderthals in between periods. They were always pushing each other into lockers and knocking books out of their teammates’ hands. Some sort of bizarre caveman-like male bonding.

She noticed one of the tall, dripping bodies break away from the team and run the opposite direction of the locker room. Mandy could tell, even from a distance, that the sculpted body belonged to Troy. Looking like an ad for Axe body spray, his hair—although wet—was still parted and styled. His arm muscles were flexed and stiff, perfectly aligned as he moved in what seemed like slow motion. His forest green and white jersey clung to the defined lines of his soaked chest and stomach.

Troy's jersey was hardly dirty. He'd avoided multiple tackles, successfully completing several plays which—as much as it pained her to admit—proved he was pretty much the “star athlete” the school had anticipated. By the look on his face it was clear that he knew this too. Troy's teeth sparkled even whiter against his dark green collar as he flashed a proud smile.

Mandy silently reminded herself not to stare as she stood and flipped open her notebook. Troy spoke before she could take control of the conversation.

“Well.” He was panting, but still smiling. “What'd you think?”

She tried to think of a witty comeback, but stopped herself. There was something about Troy's energy, the way he was beaming, that made Mandy feel like he was excited to see her.

“Not bad.” Mandy forced a grin and arched her eyebrows to look impressed.

“Whew!” Troy clapped his hands as he made his way to the second row of the bleachers. He sat and patted the empty metal bench on his left side. “Fire away Diane Sawyer.”

“Really?” Shocked and impressed he could recall the first and last name of a respectable news anchor. Mandy took a seat next to Troy careful to keep a slight

distance from her interview subject. She wanted to maintain a level of professionalism.

“Yeah, me and Diane,” Troy used his hands to make a long gesture, “we go way back.”

“Well good.” Mandy positioned her knees as a table to write on. “Because I’d like to ask you some personal questions.”

Troy straightened his posture in response. “Shoot.”

“Okay.” Dotting her first question mark, she started the interview. “When’d you start playing football?”

“Gosh.” Clapping his hands again, Troy laughed long and loud. “I was just an ant when I started.”

Mandy wrote quickly as he talked about his pee-wee football league. Starting at the age of six, Troy was pushed harder than his teammates because his father was the coach. He learned to “shake it off” even when the pain of a fall or ball to the face buzzed in his ears and made his teeth hurt. His mother was equally as tough, but she diluted her die-hard competitive attitude with fresh baked chocolate chip cookies and Capri Sun pouches. None of the other team members knew how tough Troy really had it.

He talked a great deal about his brother Jake. Seven years older than Troy, Jake was the easiest on his little brother. Most likely because he understood the pressure to perform first hand. Jake helped shape Troy’s confidence by running drills with him in their backyard during season. He’d even convinced his varsity coach to

let Troy stand on the sidelines during home games, making him feel like he was part of a real football team.

“Why quarterback?”

“Jake told me I wouldn’t get so beat up.” Troy stuck out his leg to run his fingers along a thin scar on his right shin. “Got that when I was six.” Then he pulled up the corner of his jersey to reveal more pink skin on his abdomen, “Nine.” Holding out his left elbow, he pointed to a moon-shaped mark, “Eleven.” Finally, he turned his back toward Mandy. “But this—,” he rolled up his jersey to reveal a horizontal scar that spread five inches across the middle of his back and stated proudly, “chick’s really dig that one.”

Mandy rolled her eyes as Troy covered up his chiseled body. She glanced down at the next question on her list.

“Olympic’s varsity team had an undefeated record last year.” She looked up from her notebook, so she could gauge his next response. “Why’d you switch to a school that hasn’t won a single conference game in four years?”

“I’m sure you know,” Troy leaned in, raising one eyebrow like a cheesy detective. “Anything worth something means taking a risk.”

“So you’re a big risk taker, Mr. Gladden?”

“Didn’t used to be.”

“And,” she was still writing down his previous response. “What changed your mind?”

“Jake.”

There was something different about his voice when he answered. It was unanimated and calm. Sensing there was more Troy wanted to say, but wanting to keep the interview on track, Mandy chimed in quickly, “He still play?”

“Played.” Troy emphasized the last part of the word. And then he stopped talking for a minute. “He died in a car accident four years ago.”

It took Mandy a minute to process his response. He was quiet enough for her to hear his breathing, which was now slow and heavy. She felt his eyes staring at the top of her head as she wrote, willing her to look up from her notebook before he continued his story. She didn’t want to, but Mandy eventually lifted her face and met his gaze.

Troy’s eyes didn’t shift as he looked at Mandy. He was used to people already knowing about Jake’s death. But Viking was a much bigger school than Olympic. Aside from Coach, she was the first person he had told at his new school. Usually people looked away or got real uncomfortable around him when they first found out, but Mandy didn’t flinch.

The two stared at each other silently, waiting for the other one to continue the conversation.

The sun was starting to go down and the change in temperature made Mandy lean forward to rub her arms. Troy didn’t move. He sat patiently in the same position, waiting for Mandy to say something.

But Mandy couldn’t put words together in her brain to form a sentence. She just sat there, staring at the sweaty Abercrombie model, trying to rub away the chill in

the air. Though he looked exactly the same, Troy appeared much more down to earth then he did the first time she had seen him.

And then without warning Mandy's lips parted. She heard the words come out of her mouth before she could stop them: "My mom died about two years ago."

She couldn't believe she had actually said those words out loud, to someone she barely knew.

Troy nodded his head.

There was something about his reaction that put Mandy at ease. No questions, no forced 'I'm sorry for your loss' looks. Just a silent, satisfied nod.

Troy methodically turned his body away from Mandy to face the football field. Resting his feet on the bleacher in front of them he leaned back and put his hands behind his head.

He exhaled long and slow.

It took a couple minutes, but Mandy slowly shut her notebook, latching the pen on its metal spiral. She zipped up her grey hoody and pulled the sleeves over her hands.

Then, from the corner of his eye, Troy watched as the feisty blonde relaxed her posture and leaned back against the bleacher.

Together, without a word shared between them, they watched as the assistant coach and athletic director cleaned up the equipment on the field. Like two old friends, comfortable enough to sit in complete silence. It wasn't until the pop of fluorescent lights ignited the empty field that Troy and Mandy decided it was time to go home.

“How ‘bout this one?”

“I’m not a street walker!”

“What’s a—”

“Nevermind.” Mandy snatched the skimpy French maid outfit out of Adam’s hand, and hung it behind the sparse components of a Wonder Woman costume.

It was two days before Halloween and the pickings at Costume Express were slim. The extremely organized Mandy wasn’t one to wait ‘til the last minute to do anything, but she absolutely detested Halloween. She had hoped that delaying the purchase of a costume would give Troy enough of a hint to go to their school’s Halloween party without her. To the contrary, he’d given her an ultimatum last night on the phone: “Pick out your own costume or I’ll gladly pick one for you.” Even without being face-to-face, she pictured a dashing, mischievous grin spread across his face as he spoke.

They weren’t dating. Troy didn’t have a girlfriend. Mandy didn’t have a boyfriend. But their relationship stemmed around trying new things. He challenged Mandy to weekly eight mile runs on the trails in the park. She dragged him to the art museum and open mike night at the coffee shop to listen to local grad students share free verse poems. He called her a hippy. She dubbed him a meathead. Even though beneath the teasing and playful outings they were deeply connected by loss, the topic never surfaced.

“Whoa.” Adam pulled a rainbow trimmed outfit from behind a fuzzy werewolf suit. “It sparkles when the light hits it.”

His eyes were bright and eager as he looked up at Mandy, thrusting the outfit forward so she could try it on. She tried to smile in an effort to conceal her sheer horror of the vinyl nightmare labeled “Rainbow Bright.”

Their Halloween costume hunt was meant to be a special outing for Mandy and Adam. Though the thought of sweating in a plastic suit at the dance made her stomach turn, she knew rejecting his suggestion would crush Adam’s spirit.

She’d been spending a couple weeknights and Sunday afternoons with Troy each week. Saturdays her father worked at the bakery, so Mandy and Adam had the house to themselves. They’d change the water in the tank and check on the eggs, which were not quite as rank as they were in the beginning. (Mandy still kept the rose scented air freshener plugged in on a high setting, just in case one of them died while she was at school.) Then Adam would ride his bike to a neighbor’s house and she’d catch up on homework and read.

Dirk was much busier than usual. He’d come in second at the Annual Cake and Shake with his Éclair-way to Heaven concoction which kicked up business at his bakery. The extra traffic kept him out a couple hours past close at least two nights a week, which Mandy found a little odd. In the past, Dirk would use the kitchen at home to catch up on orders. But recently he had insisted on staying late at work. And, he didn’t seem to mind. They’d listen to him hum and watch him practically bounce his way to the through the front door on those nights. She hadn’t seen him this bubbly since the months before they found out her mom was sick.

“It’s an XS.” As Mandy pulled down the collar to read the tag, the costume made a crunching, squeaky noise. “I think this is the one.”

“Sa-weet!” Adam stuck out both his hands with two thumbs up. The word and subsequent expression was a classic Troy gesture. He’d spent enough time at the house with Adam, waiting for Mandy to finish getting ready for one of their outings, that he was undoubtedly rubbing off on her little brother.

Flinching as the clerk shoved the bright yellow costume inside the shopping bag, Mandy reluctantly stuck out her hand. Before she could reach it, Adam grabbed the get up, proudly. “I’ll carry it.”

“Well, well, well.” Mandy smirked as slowly pulled open the front door and gave Troy the once-over. “Aren’t you original.”

Stepping into the brightly lit foyer, Troy flexed his real muscles against the six pack abs outlined on the plastic chest of his costume. Two pleather straps criss-crossed in his front, while a sword was strapped to his back. A matching red pleather band with a plastic gold medallion was wrapped around his head. It was hard to tell for sure, but Mandy was 99% positive his leather boots were trimmed with real animal fur.

“Technically,” she said. Folding her arms and staring at his maroon shorts. “He-man wore briefs, but I’m sure the general public appreciates the added length.”

“Wouldn’t want to offend Pippy Longstockings!” Troy stood with outstretched legs in gladiator position as he yanked on one of Mandy’s pigtails.

“I’m Rainbow Bright!”

“Rainbow who?”

Mandy backed up so Troy could see her full costume. The yellow body wasn’t meant to be a mini-dress, but with Mandy’s long legs it hit a couple inches above her knee. She’d found rainbow striped tights at Target to offset the length and finished her outfit with bright red patent leather flats. The costume was trimmed on the skirt and sleeves with a rainbow pattern which matched the two bows wrapped around the tops of her pigtails.

“Whatever.” Troy pulled Mandy’s coat off the rack and handed it to her.

“Boys don’t play with dolls.”

He stretched his head around the corner into the family room and spoke towards the back of Adam’s head who was watching Animal Planet. “Right dude?”

Adam and the sitter Mrs. Clutchen, an older grandma-ish widow from two houses down, looked up towards the booming voice.

“Aww.” She putted down her needles and the bright green scarf she was knitting. “Let me get your picture.”

A prairie dog clawing open baby iguana eggs flashed on the TV screen.

“I got it.” Adam appeared from the kitchen with his father’s camera already in hand before Mrs. C. could inch her way off the couch.

The duo paused awkwardly, hesitant to put their arms around each other. Although they’d been hanging out for months, their relationship remained platonic. In the beginning Mandy had looked at Troy as more of a cousin. He was closer than a

friend, but it felt weird to think of him as “hot” or “super cute.” But watching other girls practically throw themselves at him over and over was starting to bother her.

Troy resumed his gladiator stance while Mandy held her coat behind her back and rested her free hand on her hip. She rolled her eyes as he maneuvered into three different muscle-flexing poses, egged on by Adam’s hysterical laughter.

“Okay, okay.” Mandy put her hand up to block her face. “That’s enough.”

As she leaned forward to grab the camera from her brother, she felt Troy’s bare arm grab her by the waist and pull her back toward his body. Almost instinctually, she went limp and leaned into him. For the next three consecutive snapshots she held her breath.

“We gotta run to dad’s shop before the dance.” Wiggling out of Troy’s grip, Mandy began slipping her arms into her coat. “I forgot my wallet in his car.”

She looked at Troy, pretending to ignore the playful smile on his face.

“Seriously, no coat?”

“Superheroes don’t get cold.”

It was a Friday night. The quaint downtown district of Cedar Rapids only had metered street parking in front of Dirk’s bakery, and all the spots were full. Mandy was surprised to see the lights dim in the store and the closed sign flipped over on the front door. Her father had asked Mrs. C. to watch Adam because he needed to “catch up on orders.” Again, Mandy thought it was a little strange, but what reason did her father have for not telling the truth?

“Just pull around back.” She gestured toward a small alley way. As Troy pulled his truck closer she could tell that it wasn’t going to fit. “Do a loop,” she said hopping out of the cab. “I’ll only be a sec.”

Mandy passed a small window in the alley that opened to the bakery’s kitchen. She heard Frank Sinatra’s *That’s Life* floating through the window. As she rounded the back of the shop to pull open the door, a woman’s laugh stopped her from crossing the threshold. Her father’s laugh immediately followed. Knowing that the sight and sound of her costume was anything but inconspicuous, Mandy stood frozen, halfway between the outside and the inside of the familiar bakery. She waited for the next round of laughter, letting the noise conceal the shutting of the door.

Fly Me to the Moon began to play as Mandy tip-toed back through the alley. Ironically, at that exact moment, Mandy felt like she was actually on the moon, or some other distant unknown planet. The bakery clearly was closed, which meant her father had lied about being open late on Friday. Had he lied about all those other weeknights? And he was obviously with a woman in his kitchen. Probably making her pasta and tiny decorated cakes just like he did for anniversaries with her mom.

Mandy felt like her body was on fire. The happy costume was sucking the life out of her. Untying her coat, she ran toward the black passenger door of Troy’s pickup truck, idling near the end of the alley. Her patent leather shoes slipped on the pavement and metal step as she tried to claw her way into the car. Troy unbuckled his seat belt to help.

“Just drive.” She said frantically, reaching for his hand. Her yellow dress stuck to the leather seat as Troy pulled her into the car, causing her to land on her stomach. He’d never seen her so terrified.

“What hap—”

“Drive!” She slammed the door as Troy’s foot hit the accelerator.

The smell of pancakes, sizzling bacon and coffee was oddly comforting to Mandy. The diner on 4th street was a place she and her family frequented after church on Sundays. When Troy asked where she wanted to go it was the first place that popped into her head. She needed something to make her feel connected to her mother again.

The Gladiator-Rainbow duo made their way to a booth in the back near the kitchen, trying their best not to draw additional attention to themselves. Despite Troy’s efforts to conceal his plastic chest with a sweatshirt he’d found in his backseat, several old timers stopped him along the way to shake his hand and congratulate him on the Viking’s undefeated season.

Sensing the stares and giggles, Mandy kept walking. She quickly tucked her legs toward the inside of the booth when she sat down. Though there was no concealing Troy’s furry boots as he slid them underneath the table.

“Two number sevens, one over-easy, one scrambled, two coffees and a side of pancakes.” Troy ordered without even opening the menus and quickly handed them back to the waitress so he could focus on Mandy.

“Anything for the best quarterback in Linn County.” The waitress winked at the Gladiator before heading back toward the kitchen.

“Maybe, they’re just friends.” Troy tried to say it with confidence, but it came out more like a question.

Folding her arms in response, Mandy blew air slowly out of her mouth and leaned back against the booth. She felt her costume adhere to the vinyl bench. Even though she was annoyed at Troy’s suggestion, she was—at this point in time—happy he was a horrible liar. At least she knew when *he* was telling the truth.

“Candlelight, Frank Sinatra, Friday night?!”

Troy pulled the headband off his head and laid it on the table. He could tell Mandy was geared up for a serious conversation.

“Why would he lie about it?” She stared intensely at Troy as if he actually had an answer.

“About work or the laughing lady?”

“Either one!” She slammed her hand on the table shaking the metal napkin dispenser and knocking over the daily special table sign. The other customers didn’t seem to notice. They were used to rowdy teenagers making noise in the 4th Street Diner.

“Now that’s not very Rainbow Bright of you.” Troy said evenly, trying desperately to dissipate some of her anger.

Before she could respond, the waitress slid the dishes underneath their noses. Mandy quickly swapped Troy’s scrambled plate with her order. She stabbed her fork

into both yolks, watching the soft white skin slowly break and release the yellow ooze onto the sausage links.

“I just wish he would have told me.”

“Maybe he wanted to be sure she was worth the fuss.” Troy dumped the syrup onto the pancakes. He knew they were Mandy’s favorite and was hoping the small gesture would make her happy.

“I’m not a freaking child!” Mandy’s pigtails bounced as she dove into the first bite of eggs.

The sight of her hair pulled back in ribbons like a little girl, seething with anger, while wearing one of the happiest costumes, made Troy laugh out loud. He turned the metal napkin dispenser to face Mandy so she could see her reflection.

“You sure about that?”

She paused still chewing, and then began to laugh. They both did, uncontrollably, until Mandy broke down into tears. Picking up her fork, she shoveled in eggs, sausage and pancakes without saying a word. And Troy knew better than to interrupt the silence.

Mandy sat quietly at the breakfast table. Her knees tucked under her chin like a puma ready to pounce on its unsuspecting furry prey. It was almost ten a.m. on Saturday and her father still hadn’t come downstairs. At 9:30 she’d handed Adam a bowl of Lucky Charms and told him it was okay to eat in front of the TV. She didn’t care if it

was against her father's rules. A soggy cereal stain on the carpet was nothing compared to weeks of lying to your kids.

"Man." Dirk squinted at the glaring light above the island as he made his way into the kitchen. "Haven't slept that late in years." As he shuffled towards the coffee pot, he noticed Mandy tucked away in the corner of the eat-in nook. Her arms wrapped tightly around her legs as if they'd fall off upon letting go. There was nothing in front of her—no empty cup of juice, no polished dirty plate, no indication that she'd eaten anything for breakfast. And for Mandy not to eat meant something was eating her.

"Should I make enough for two?" He asked as he filled the carafe, but his daughter didn't make a sound.

Sirens blared from the TV room as animal cops busted a puppy mill. Then the sound of a laugh track chimed in as Adam quickly switched the channel to a mindless Disney sitcom. He hated confrontation.

"How was the dance?" Dirk stuck his head inside the fridge and continued his hunt for breakfast.

"I think *some* of us had more fun last night." Mandy's voice was low and methodical, as if she was plotting her next move.

He found the cream and pulled it to the edge of the shelf. Dirk wasn't sure who she was mad at, but it was far too early for him to tackle Mandy's PMS without some serious caffeine.

"You and Troy have a fight?"

She watched Dirk removed her mother's favorite mug from the cabinet and fill the bottom with cream. The sight of it pushed her anger to the next level.

Dirk felt the steam hit his face as he filled the cup with coffee. Mandy still hadn't answered his question.

"Wanna talk about it?" The first sip was scalding, but he drank fast, arming himself for what felt like was going to be an unpleasant conversation.

"Not unless you do."

Dirk turned to face his daughter. She hadn't moved, but there was something about her body language that was even more guarded and defensive. He stopped at the end of the island and stood in talking distance from Mandy. It was clear there wasn't a place for him at the table. He sipped his coffee loudly, prompting her to take the lead.

"How was your date last night?"

Dirk choked, physically and emotionally, as coffee shot out of his mouth. Swallowing hard to prevent more leakage, he ran toward the sink spilling hot coffee down the side of his arm. Heat welled in his stomach as he felt Mandy watching him, waiting for an answer. He had hoped she'd run out of the room in true dramatic fashion giving him some time to come up with a response.

But she hadn't. Her body was still crouched in the corner, only now her head was cocked so she could glare at him. He could feel the emotion radiate from her body and Dirk knew he had no choice but to face her.

Dirk had first met the mystery woman about two months ago when she came into the bakery with her seven-year-old niece to order cupcakes for the young lady's birthday party. She was pint-sized and very pretty, but it was her patience with the indecisive niece that really impressed Dirk. The two of them spent at least an hour flipping through his image galleries, slowly examining and discussing each option, until finally settling on a hot pink and white Hello Kitty design. The bakery was so busy that day he'd forgotten to write down whether she wanted butter or whipped cream frosting. When he called to confirm later that week, he found out the woman was a vet, and he immediately shared the story of Adam's iguana eggs. They ended up talking for hours.

Standing at the kitchen sink, Dirk stared at his reflection in the window. "I never meant to hurt you."

"Too late."

"I was waiting for the right time to—"

"Now's good." Mandy's throat was dry and sore as she prompted her father to share his story.

Dirk towed off the sides of his mug and filled it with coffee. Without asking, he pulled a second mug from the cabinet and filled it for Mandy. Then he slid the cup in front of his daughter, careful not to get too close. She released her knees and wrapped her hands around the warm peace offering.

Before either of them said a word the water began to form in the backs of their eyes. What was about to happen was more than just a conversation between a father and daughter. It was a changing of the guards. By openly admitting that someone

else, another woman, had entered her father's life meant that her mother was really gone.

Reaching across the table, Dirk tucked Mandy's hair behind her ear. She leaned her left cheek into his right palm as he wiped the tears from her face.

"Her name is Paige," he said. "Paige Stokum."

She invited Troy as back-up. Mandy knew he'd keep the Sunday dinner mood light-hearted. He'd also keep her mood in check, just in case emotions got the best of her and she tried to spring across the table and knock Paige out of her seat. Besides, Troy's presence kept the meal from becoming a family dinner which was something Mandy definitely wasn't ready for.

They were eating in the formal dining room. Though, there wasn't anything really formal about it. The table was created from an old barn door that Kylie had found dangling on an abandoned farmhouse off of US-218 fifteen years ago. She'd asked Mrs. C's husband, who was a carpenter, to add legs and a support beam. To him, using a dilapidated door as a table was ludicrous. Kylie thought it was charming. She paired it with eight chocolate brown leather chairs. It took her and Dirk a couple years to fill the table because, at that time, they could only afford to buy one chair every couple of months.

Mandy pulled two of those chairs away from the table and tucked them into opposite corners of the room. She picked up a stack of white plates from the

kitchen—they didn't use China—and began making her way around the table. Then she folded grey linen napkins into triangles, tucked them into the left side of the plate and placed the silverware on top. There was an antique rod iron lantern in the middle of the table. Mandy blew the dust off its top as she opened the tiny door and reached inside to light the vanilla scented candle.

“She’s here!” Adam shouted like a kid who’d just seen Santa Claus and bolted toward the front door.

Annoyed at her younger brother’s enthusiasm toward their guest, Mandy stomped into the kitchen to grab the water glasses. Earlier Adam had written down a list of questions for Paige to answer about the incubating iguana eggs. Clearly she’d won him over. Mandy took her time finishing the table setting, assuring she wouldn’t be there to greet Paige at the front door.

“Can’t hide in here all night.”

The smell of charcoal and ash overtook the sweet scented candle as Troy stepped into the dining room.

“You smell like a forest fire.” Mandy moved to the next place-setting, continuing to align the water glasses exactly four inches to the upper right side of each plate.

“Oops.” Troy slid one of the glasses an extra inch away from the plate. “This one’s a little off.”

He beamed as Mandy shot him a death look. She was about to spout off a nasty threat to the taunting quarterback when she heard the laugh. The happy sound made her spine tingle.

Deep breath Mandy told herself. But it was hard to hear her own thoughts above the heartbeat pulsating loudly in her ears. If she could eat dinner and only listen to Paige's voice it would make the transition easier. It was one thing to know her father was dating someone else, to hear the woman's voice from a distance. But to actually *see* her face was completely overwhelming. Would she look like her mom? What if she was prettier? Younger?

As the familiar voices of her father and Adam moved closer to the dining room, Mandy released the last water glass and launched for the kitchen doorway. Anticipating her move, Troy deflected the terrified blonde, bouncing her tiny frame off his solid chest.

"Pull it together." He reprimanded Mandy through gritted teeth and turned her slowly to face the approaching dinner guest.

"And this—" Dirk made his way from Paige and Adam to give his daughter a side hug "—is Amanda."

Mandy watched as the tiny woman in the brown leather coat stretched out her hand. But she couldn't move. Paige wasn't a supermodel or nearly as put-together as her mother. She was rather...plain. Her hair was super short and buttery blonde. It formed a perfect frame around her circular pale face. It appeared she wasn't wearing any make-up, but Paige's light skin and piercing blue eyes made her look like a porcelain doll.

"And I'm Troy." He intentionally bumped Mandy as he reached past her to grab Paige's waiting hand.

“I hear you’re our master chef tonight.” Sensing Mandy’s anxiety, Paige tried to warm over the person she thought was the young woman’s boyfriend.

“‘Master,’ well heck.” Troy’s voice sounded louder in the crowded dining room. “I like the sound of that.”

They all laughed politely, and then, silence. The sound of forced smiles stretching across everyone’s teeth filled the room.

“Want to see the babies?” Adam was already gripping Paige’s hand, trying to lead her out of the room.

“Good idea.” Dirk gestured toward the stairway. “We’ll finish getting the show ready.”

And ‘show’ it would be, Mandy thought to herself. There was no way this boring, animal-loving, granola-looking woman was going to be her future step-mother.

Adam slowly pushed open the door to Mandy’s bedroom. Still holding Paige’s hand he felt her hesitate in the threshold.

“It’s okay.” He whispered as he pulled her into Mandy’s room. “She doesn’t mind if we come in.”

Paige heard the faint buzz of the heat lamp as Adam led her toward the make-shift incubator. She’d only seen baby iguana eggs twice in her 13 years of veterinary practice. They typically died shortly after the mother laid them because most owners

didn't know what to do with the eggs. She was impressed at the lengths Adam and Mandy had gone to in their attempt to hatch them.

As Adam clicked on Mandy's desk lamp so Paige could get a better look, she noted how organized the desk was. There were groups of folders, all neatly labeled, tucked inside a hanging file organizer. They were different shades of pink and green with various shapes, but still felt a little too grown up for a sophomore in high school. She noticed the one labeled "Eggs" closest to the front.

"Wow." Paige said softly, kneeling down to make herself eye level with the tank. "You guys did such a great job."

"It was mostly Mandy." Adam admitted, pressing his face up against the glass. "I supervised."

Before Paige could respond, he continued. "Do you think they'll die?"

She had anticipated just about every question Adam could have thrown her way, except this one. The truth was she had no idea if they would survive. But she wasn't about to ruin the evening by giving the seven year old a dose of reality.

"Well, Adam," she focused on the eggs as she formulated a balanced answer. "I think the most important thing is that you and your sister built them a stable environment." She turned to face him, reassuringly. "They appear to have everything they need right now."

Adam grinned, satisfied.

"The steaks are done." Mandy was standing in the doorway, keeping her distance from Adam and the woman as they hovered over the eggs.

Paige turned to face the teenager, the light from the heat lamp illuminating her face as she smiled.

“Mandy!” Running into his sister, Adam threw his arms around her waist.

“Paige says they’re gonna live!”

“Well,” Paige began as she made her way to her feet. “I think you both have given them a great chance at survival.”

They listened as Adam pounded his way down the wooden stairs.

“Please be careful.” Mandy cautioned as her father’s girlfriend approached the doorway. “I don’t want him to get his hopes up.”

Then she turned and headed toward the stairs before Paige could respond.

“So Paige,” Troy moved a mouthful of food to the side of his cheek, so he could continue. “What’s the craziest thing you’ve ever seen at work?”

Normally Mandy would have scolded her close friend for his lack of manners at the table, but the dinner conversation had completely exhausted her. Listening to the three guys in her life gush over everything Paige said was nauseating. She was a vet, not Mother Theresa. But every story she told, every word that came out of her mouth was greeted with a laugh, an “oh, that’s amazing,” or—Adam’s favorite phrase—“that rocks!” Mandy’s cheeks literally hurt from forcing a fake yearbook smile for the last 45 minutes.

“Well, that’s an easy one.” Paige grabbed her water glass and gulped down what was left to gear up for her next big story. “Otis, the St. Bernard.”

“I’ll get you some more water.” Mandy jumped at her chance to exit the table. Snatching the empty glass from Paige’s grip, she bolted into the kitchen.

Dirk watched his daughter leave the room. He knew this evening was going to be a little rocky, and he got the sense that Mandy—though trying her hardest to be polite—needed a little break. With Adam completely mesmerized by Otis the frog-eating dog, Dirk grabbed his empty plate, shot Paige a wink, and headed into the kitchen.

Mandy had already removed the glass lid from the cake stand and was cutting slices of her father’s seven-layer, cream cheese frosted red velvet cake.

“Want some help?” Dirk stopped at the edge of the island watching her carefully slice through the layers, making sure the piece remained intact as she slid it onto the dessert plate.

“I’m fine.” Without looking up Mandy continued to cut the next piece.

Dirk moved around the side of the island, standing within breathing distance of her.

Exhaling mid-cut, she paused and looked up at her father. “Really, I’m fine.”

He didn’t want to push. But he wanted—needed—some some kind of reassurance from his daughter that she was going to give Paige a chance.

Dirk picked up the water glass and moved to the sink. With his back to Mandy, he felt a little safer asking his next question. “So, what do you think?”

He could see her reflection in the window above the kitchen sink. The sound of running water filled the silence between them as he rinsed the dishes and waited for her answer.

Mandy placed the last piece of cake on its plate then replaced the lid. She turned to face her father. “Sounds like Otis is the world’s dumbest animal.”

Grabbing four dessert plates at once, she swiveled on her heels and headed back into the dining room.

Troy and Adam were still ewing and awing about the story as Mandy began sliding the cake plates in front of them. She started to grab the remaining dirty plates from the table when Paige interrupted.

“Oh, Mandy,” she said, picking up her own plate. Paige began sliding out her chair. “Let me help you.”

“No, I got it.” Mandy grabbed the plate out of the woman’s hand. “Just keep talking.” She didn’t mean it to sound as short as it came out.

“She hates animals.” Adam confessed, rolling his eyes.

“I don’t hate them.” Mandy protested over her shoulder from the kitchen as she handed Dirk—who was still standing at the sink—the stack of dirty dinner plates.

“Nah.” Troy shoved a piece of cake into his mouth and decided to play along. “More like despises them.”

He could tell when Mandy reappeared in the doorway she wanted to take a swing at him. Lucky for Troy, she was holding her slice of cake, and the girl would never give up a piece a junk food for anything.

“I just think they’re messy and needy and—”

“Cute and cuddly.” Dirk chimed in standing behind his daughter and began nudging her back to the table.

“And scale-y,” Adam added.

“And they make people happy.” Troy turned to grin at Mandy as she took her seat next to him.

“Also true.” Dirk pointed his fork at Troy, confirming his agreement.

“And then they die.” It came out quickly, before she could think of what she was saying. Mandy was looking down at her dessert when she said it, but without looking up she could feel the stares boring into the top of her skull.

“She’s right.” Paige broke the silence. “That’s the hardest thing about having a pet.”

The teenager slowly looked up as her father’s girlfriend continued. Paige looked right at Mandy as she spoke.

“Their owners almost always outlive them.”

Mandy didn’t know what was worse: what she had said or the fact that the only person who took her side was her father’s new girlfriend.

“Well, that was entertaining.” Troy made his way onto the front porch to join Mandy on the hanging swing. The night was cooler than usual, so he’d brought a fleece blanket from the family room and handed it to her as he took his seat.

He sat closer to her than usual. She assumed it was because he knew she was upset. It wasn’t until he put his arm around her that Mandy felt things might be changing between them. But she was too wiped out to overthink things right now. Just having Troy close to her meant she hadn’t screwed things up too badly.

“Thanks for coming.” Mandy eased into the crook of Troy’s arm and rested her head on his muscular shoulder. The sound of the wooden swing creaked as they began to rock slowly back and forth. Inside the house she heard Paige laughing. The noise, unexpectedly, made her shutter. “She doesn’t seem a little too...*happy* to you?”

“What?” A deep laugh shook Troy’s body as he spoke. “Would you rather her act like a big jerk?”

Mandy waited a couple sways before answering. “Just seems kind of fake to me.”

“Or, maybe you’re just a grumpy pants.”

“Shut it.” Mandy playfully jabbed Troy in the stomach with her elbow. He grabbed her wrist and held it to his chest.

They sat in that position for several sways. Neither of them spoke or breathed too loudly. Both were waiting for the other one to move. Inside the house the intro to *Pet Detective* played on the TV.

Loosening his grip, Troy slid Mandy’s palm into his hand. Then he wrapped their fingers together. It was the first time in their three months of hanging out that they crossed the friendship line.

“Do you think he’ll marry her?” Mandy tried to focus on the conversation as she looked down at their hands. She let her head rest on Troy’s shoulder and listened to her own heartbeat in her ear.

“Why don’t you ask him?” Troy’s voice echoed through his body when he talked.

It made Mandy wonder if it was Troy's heartbeat that was banging in her ear. Suddenly she felt overwhelmed again. She wasn't sure if it was the evening or the football player's massive hand clamped around her fingers.

Mandy sat up straight to get her balance. "I guess I'm afraid of his answer."

Looking straight ahead to the other side of the front porch, she could feel Troy staring at the side of her face. She waited for him to say something in response, but he didn't. Mandy turned to face him trying to get a read on the situation.

Troy looked different. He wasn't smiling. He wasn't playful. He looked...serious.

He released her hand and leaned forward.

Even though she knew what was about to happen, Mandy didn't put up her guard. Not because she was tired, and not because she was upset. She let Troy lean in to kiss her because her feelings for him had changed.

When it gets cold in a small town like Cedar Rapids, people do one of two things: stay inside with a warm blanket and watch TV, or venture outside with a warm blanket to watch football. Thanks to Troy Gladden, the town actually had a decent high school team to watch this year. By the second week in November the Vikings were 8-1.

Mandy didn't dislike football, but until she'd met Troy, her main reason for attending the games was to interview players for the school newspaper. Unlike the other females in her class, she wasn't concerned with impressing the sweaty jocks.

She'd show up at half-time, take a couple notes and casually venture down to the field in blue jeans or sweats to chat with the guys after the game. Her "I don't really care what you think" approach served her well as a journalist because players often divulged real details to Mandy that otherwise would have been embellished to impress her fellow premadonna reporters.

At tonight's game, Mandy wasn't there for a school assignment. She was curled up with the rest of the town in a fleece blanket, cheering the Vikings onto their next victory. But their chances weren't looking so good. It was forth quarter of the conference game and the boys were down 10-7 against the Saints. They needed a win to head to Regionals.

As Mandy tugged the blanket tighter around her shoulders, she smiled knowing that she wasn't just an average fan. Mandy Baugh was the official girlfriend of the team's star quarterback.

She had decided to keep the new phase of her relationship silent from her father. And she had asked Troy to do the same. At least for a little while. It wasn't really a secret. Mandy just didn't come out and tell him that Troy was her boyfriend. She was afraid her father might restrict the amount of time they spent together. And Troy was her excuse to get out of the house. The house that seemed to have become Paige's new semi-permanent residence.

Suddenly the crowd was on its feet. With just eight seconds left in the game, Troy had launched a Hail Mary pass into the Viking's end zone. Mandy watched the football spiral in slow motion towards the back of number twelve. As Kent Black

stretched out his arms, she pinched her eyes shut and sucked cold air through her nose. She held them closed until she heard a smack. And the crowd went nuts.

For the first time in four years, the Vikings were going to Regionals.

There were hugs and high-fives. Fathers of senior players cried like little girls. Cheerleaders flipped and threw one another in the air. Every Viking player fled the bench and ran towards Troy, who was being carried into the locker room on a throne of human hands.

Just before leaving the field, he spotted Mandy in the stands. Troy lifted both arms and pointed to his girlfriend. He mouthed the words 'I love you' before disappearing into a sea of sweaty bodies.

Caught up in the moment, Mandy forgot that her father and Paige were sitting just one row behind her. She might have wanted to keep her relationship on the down low, but it was obvious to Mandy's father that his daughter and Troy were much more than just friends.

Since Adam was old enough to walk, the Baugh family had spent Thanksgiving in Park City, Utah with their Uncle Paul—Dirk's kid brother—Aunt Kate and their two boys Hunter and Hans. The cousins were right around the same age as Mandy, and they had all learned to ski together. Except for Adam. He'd spent his earlier years in footy pajamas, tucked inside a Baby Bjorn, strapped to his mother Kylie as she and Kate shopped downtown. After his mother died, Adam continued to be his Aunt Kate's shopping buddy.

Mandy, even when her mother was alive, had no interest in shopping. She was more concerned with schooling her cousins on the mountain. Though, this year the rivalry among them was quite steep. Last season the boys had declared skiing “lame” and showed up with brand new snowboards. It took Mandy a morning and afternoon lesson the first day of their trip to learn how to stand up for longer than two minutes. Determined to hold her own, she begged her father for a snowboard so she could practice at the local ski slopes at home. After taping advertisements to the fridge and tucking them under his pillow, inside his drawers, even his shoes, Dirk finally caved and bought her a Burton board that Christmas. She’d spent almost every weekend practicing that winter and had been looking forward to the trip for eleven months. So she couldn’t understand why her father couldn’t understand how upset she was with the sudden change of plans.

“But it’s a tradition.” Mandy zeroed in on her father’s eyes which at the moment were behind thick baker goggles making them three times their normal size. A tiny light adhered to the side lit up the intricate daisy design he’d spent the last 90 minutes creating.

“And it still is...just a couple weeks later.” Dirk argued with a steady voice as he floated just centimeters above the three-story cake. “There’s plenty of powder in December.”

Mandy wasn’t used to losing arguments with her father. She needed to find his weak spot, fast.

“Can’t you guys spend one week apart?”

“I could say the same thing for you and Troy.” He baited his daughter to see if she would spill the beans about her new relationship. Dirk watched Mandy’s posture stiffen on the bar stool. He continued to fill in the pedals on each daisy as he waited for her to respond.

“It’s different.” She looked down at her knees as she crossed her legs. “We’re just friends.”

Disappointed and unsure as to why his daughter was holding back the truth about her feelings for Troy, he tried to focus on the argument at hand. Dirk put down the icing, pulled the goggles on top of his head and moved a bar stool in front of Mandy.

“Remember our first Thanksgiving without mom?”

“Yes.” She sensed where the conversation was headed and tried to keep it from becoming too deep. “We went to Utah.”

“That’s right.” Dirk played along with the angle Mandy was taking. “Because we wanted to be surrounded by our family for the holiday.”

She felt like her father was setting her up. Rather than fueling the fire, she kept her mouth shut and instead nodded in response.

“Well, Paige’s parents are in Hawaii...”

Mandy knew where her father was heading now.

“...and she’s an only child.”

Even though the thought of her father’s girlfriend flying with them to meet the extended family was unsettling, spending the entire Thanksgiving break cooped up in the house with Dirk, Paige and Adam was much worse. Troy was playing at

Regionals a little over an hour away and most of her friends had big family get-togethers for the holiday. Besides, taking the trip in December would carve a day and a half of skiing out of their trip.

And while Paige wasn't her favorite person in the world, the woman didn't deserve to spend Thanksgiving alone. It was a gamble, but Mandy figured her father would be so preoccupied with Paige that she could spend even more time snowboarding with her cousins.

So, she went for it: "Then why don't you just bring her along?"

Dirk looked intensely at his daughter, trying to read the level of sincerity in her offer. He knew this was a monumental step for her to take.

"You must really want to use that new board."

Mandy smiled innocently and shrugged her shoulders.

"And you'll be a sweet little snow bunny?"

"I'll make the Easter Bunny look like Freddie Kruger." Mandy batted her eyes for added effect.

"Alright." Dirk turned off the light on his goggles. "I'll go call your Uncle."

Mandy leapt off her stool and wrapped her arms around her father's waist. He laughed and squeezed her tightly.

Since he'd introduced her to Paige, Mandy had kept her distance from him the last few months. He wasn't sure if she was punishing him for having a new woman in his life or because his daughter had replaced him with her high school sweetheart.

“Pretty bold move Blondie.” Even Troy was surprised with Mandy’s open invite for Paige to attend their sacred family outing. He turned to face her wearing a full-fledged fur hat.

“Hello Davy Crockett!” She yanked the hat off her boyfriend’s head and placed it back on the rack.

“Oh.” Troy sounded overly amused as he slipped a purple felt hat with a ridiculously large pink plastic flower onto Mandy’s head. Then he stepped back and turned her towards the mirror. “*This* is the one.”

The two teenagers stared at their reflection in Kohl’s department store. The top of the hat brushed underneath Troy’s chin as he stood behind Mandy, wrapping his arms around her waist.

“I look like a ten year old.”

“And you act like one too.”

She swiveled playfully to push away from Troy. But he locked her tiny frame in a bear grip, pulling her inches from his face. The sound of Peter Gabriel’s *In Your Eyes* played overhead as they leaned in to kiss each other.

“Mandy?”

It was as if someone had taken her favorite song, broken the CD in half and run it over with their car. She recognized the voice immediately and turned slowly away from Troy to greet her father’s girlfriend.

“Hey lady!” Troy pushed past Mandy to give Paige a giant hug. “Getting some new gear for the slopes?!”

He held his arms up and leaned sideways, pretending to be a skier gliding down the mountain.

Mandy fantasized about pushing him over into the Clearance coat rack. He was way too happy to see Paige.

Then it hit her: how much did Paige actually see? Would she run back like a tattletale and tell her father the truth about Troy?

“Excited about the trip?” Mandy smiled as sincerely as she possibly could. After all it was her idea to invite Paige.

“Absolutely!” Paige held up a red ski coat she’d decided to purchase. “Think this will do the trick?”

“Northface.” Troy examined the tag on the coat as he responded. “Pretty solid.”

“Is *that* Northface?” Jokingly, Paige pointed at the faux-flowered hat still on Mandy’s head.

Feeling the heat on her cheeks as they turned red, Mandy yanked it off and crammed it on the rack.

“Mandy’s fashionably challenged.” Troy pulled a charcoal knit ski hat off the rack and slipped it onto Mandy’s head covering her eyes. “That’s why she has me.”

“Well, you two are very lucky to have each other.”

It was the way Paige said that last comment that convinced Mandy her father’s girlfriend knew she and Troy were way more than just friends. It sent a wave of panic through her stomach. Not because she thought Paige would tell her father.

She felt a pang of nausea because Paige knew her secret. Which meant Mandy owed her something in return.

“Don’t forget long johns.” Mandy suggested in a serious tone. “Make sure they’re the kind that wick away your sweat.”

Listening to her voice reminded Troy of a bad infomercial. He couldn’t figure out why Paige brought out the weird in his girlfriend.

“Well,” she tucked the Northface jacket under her arm. “I need to check on some patients at the office.”

Before Mandy could open her mouth and say something odd, again, Troy reached out to give Paige a quick squeeze. “Enjoy your trip.”

She smiled at the young couple and left just as silently as she had arrived.

It was seven a.m. when Mandy flipped over on the top bunk and noticed the snow falling outside the guest bedroom window. She crept down the ladder, careful not to wake her snoozing younger brother. Pulling on her Uggs, she made her way down the hallway to her Uncle’s kitchen. The smell of vanilla flavored coffee let her know she wasn’t the only early riser. She looked across the open kitchen and the two-story great room and noticed a figure sitting in an Adirondack chair outside on the deck. Her aunt’s green knit ski hat covered the person’s head while a plaid flannel blanket formed a cocoon around her body. Looking forward to some one-on-one time with her aunt, Mandy filled an oversized bright yellow coffee mug and headed toward the sliding glass door.

The figure turned at the sound of the door opening. Mandy immediately spotted the pale skin and bulging blue eyes as Paige smiled. Trying to hide her disappointment, she grabbed a blanket out of the basket and joined her father's girlfriend on the porch.

"It's beautiful here." Paige turned her attention back to the falling snow as Mandy settled into an adjacent chair just a few inches away.

"I'm always the first one up when we stay here." Mandy tucked the blanket securely underneath her legs as she curled into the chair. Then she leaned back and blew on her steaming coffee.

The two sat quietly staring ahead at the view. Situated at the top of the mountain, the deck overlooked a row of houses several feet below. Across a small winding road, the ski runs spread like arms of a giant white spider carving its way through the pine trees and up the mountain. The chairlifts dangled on their tiny webs, frozen until the slopes came back to life at nine a.m.

Mandy waited for Paige to ask a prodding question about Troy or prom or snowboarding. But instead, she continued to look ahead and sip her coffee. Mandy was about to break the silence between them when her cell phone began to vibrate inside of the front pocket of her hoodie.

It was a text message from Troy: DON'T MAKE UR COUSINS CRY 2 HARD. CALL YOU AFTER AM WARM UPS.

She tucked the phone back inside her pocket and drew a long sip of coffee from her mug.

Even from the corner of her eye, Paige could see the smile spread across the teenager's face. "How's Troy?"

Mandy swallowed hard to keep the hot liquid from shooting out of her mouth. Most people considered her hard to read, but somehow Paige could read Mandy like an open book. Annoying as it was, she had to admit it was kind of impressive.

"He's on his way to practice."

"Think they'll beat the Saints?" Paige continued to look ahead as she spoke to Mandy.

"I'm staying here if they don't."

The two laughed in sync.

It was the first time they'd had a solo conversation. And to Mandy's surprise it wasn't that bad. Paige had always come across as anxious when she stopped by the house. Always eager to see her dad and Adam, but awkwardly quiet when Mandy was in the room. Though this morning, she seemed at ease around Mandy. And, for the first time, Mandy felt relaxed around the new woman in her father's life.

A little over a thousand miles and one time zone away, twelve baby iguanas began to wrestle in their shells. One by one they would slowly cut through the leathery flesh of their protective layer. Typically, after making the initial incision, they would fall back asleep for several days before deciding it was time to come out.

After helping Kate make breakfast for the crew that morning, Paige and Mandy went their separate ways. The ladies, and of course Adam, got showered for their shopping trip, while the guys, and Mandy, suited up for the slopes inside the mud room.

“Think you can hang?” Hunter, the younger of her two cousins, playfully pushed Mandy against the wall as she stood up in her snowboarding boots.

“Hope your skills are bigger than your mouth.” She stood up again and grabbed her snowboard. “See you at the bottom.”

Dirk winked at his brother. “I bet you lunch my little lady buries your boys.”

Paul held up his poll and knocked it against Dirk’s. A make-shift handshake for their bet. “You’re on.”

The five of them made their way out the back door of the mudroom and headed toward the lodge to buy lift tickets. The teenagers continued to talk smack to each other, egging on the competition.

By the time they hit the first slope, their adrenaline was so high the three cousins had forgotten about the ice warning at the top of Bear Paw Run. Eager to keep her father from losing the bet, Mandy leaned into the last bend to pick up speed. She looked over her right shoulder to gauge the distance between herself and her cousins. Although the gesture only took a few seconds, it was long enough for the boarder just a few feet in front of her to lose his balance and wipe out. When Mandy turned around it was too late for her to maneuver around him.

From several feet back, Dirk's heart moved up into his throat as he watched his daughter cartwheel into the air. Mandy's board came up over her head as she flipped once and landed on her side.

She couldn't scream because the fall had knocked the wind out of her. As her family made their way to where she had landed, Mandy felt the pain of her broken collar bone set in.

"What were you thinking?" Still wearing his ski gear and lift ticket, Dirk leaned over his daughter who was slumped up against the hospital bed wearing a navy blue sling.

"I didn't want you to pay for lunch." She began to laugh and immediately winced in pain. "How long until—"

"It could take a couple months." Dirk aimed the straw on the tray towards his daughter. "Lucky it wasn't your right hook."

"Mandy!"

Dirk grabbed Adam by the back of the neck before he could successfully hug his sister.

"Easy." He took his son's hand inside his own and guided him to the side of Mandy's bed. "She's going to be out of commission for a while."

"Good thing that handsome boyfriend of yours has strong arms." Paige said it without thinking as she entered the room. It wasn't until the three blank stares greeted her that she realized what she had done.

“Troy’s your *boyfriend*?” Adam asked with both a confused and grossed out tone.

Mandy couldn’t take her eyes off Paige. Not only because she was shocked at what had just come out of her mouth, but also because she was too afraid to face her brother or her father’s reactions.

“Since when?” Dirk, who had suspected the transition, acted surprised as he sat at the foot of Mandy’s bed.

“Adam,” Paige came up behind him and placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Why don’t we go down the hall and get ice cream for everyone.”

Easy out, Mandy thought to herself. What kid would turn down ice cream.

Feeling the fire from Mandy’s eyes boring searing into the back of her head, Paige couldn’t get out of the room fast enough.

Mandy couldn’t think of a worse place she’d rather be at that exact moment in time. She was stuck in a hospital bed, in pain, with nowhere to run. And her father’s nosey girlfriend had completely crushed her dad’s trust.

“It’s nothing dad.”

“Oh, it’s something. Or you wouldn’t have kept it from me.”

“She had no right—”

“Don’t blame Paige because you didn’t tell me the truth.”

“So you’re taking her side?” Mandy desperately wanted to fold her arms in protest.

“There’s no side Mandy.” Dirk got up from the bed and moved over to the window. He exhaled slowly. “You used to tell me everything.”

“But this is different.” Her voice picked up with emotion. “I’ve never felt this way before.”

Dirk turned from the window and smiled at his broken daughter. He finally understood why she hadn’t been upfront about Troy. Mandy was a teenager now. And there were certain conversations reserved only for a mother and a daughter. It was the first time in months that he actually ached for Kylie.

“Looks like you’ll heal just fine.” A grey-haired doctor moved quickly through the doorway with a chart in his hand.

“So I can go home?”

“Yup.” He closed the folder and smiled at the father and daughter. “Lucky for you it was a nice clean break.”

As he exited the room Mandy felt anything but lucky. She’d be spending the rest of her Thanksgiving break reading in front of the fireplace, trying to avoid her father’s trust-busting girlfriend.

“You sure you’ll be alright?” Dirk placed the remote on Mandy’s lap so she wouldn’t have to reach over to change the channel.

Without taking her eyes off the TV, Mandy answered her father with a nod. She was still giving him the silent treatment.

Even though she’d kept her relationship a secret just as he had kept his with Paige, Dirk still decided to ground her when they got home. Well technically, he had grounded Troy from coming over without another adult in the house.

It was Wednesday night, exactly seven days since Mandy had broken her collar bone. She was too uncomfortable to sleep in her bed so she'd made a make-shift bunk on the family room sofa. Dirk had a wedding the following weekend and due to a last minute request from the bride for 600 additional pastries, he was headed into the bakery for several hours.

As she watched his car back out of the driveway, Mandy pulled the blanket up over her legs. Forgetting about the glass of Gatorade she'd tucked in-between the couch cushions, it tipped over and soaked through her cotton sweatpants.

"You've got to be kidding me." Mumbling to herself, Mandy used her good arm to push herself off the couch. She slowly made her way up the stairs to her bedroom.

Looking around for a pair of comfy pants that didn't require two hands to put on, she noticed some movement from the glass tank on her desk. Assuming she was dazed from the pain killers, she crossed the room and began digging through her bottom dresser drawer. Until she heard a noise come from the direction of the desk.

Tired, wet and completely annoyed, Mandy stomped over to the side of the incubator. It took her a minute to register what appeared to be a full-out hallucination. There were twelve pinky-sized green blobs rolling around the tank.

The eggs had hatched.

She panicked.

Should she wake Adam up? Who should she call? Did she have time to change her pants?

She grabbed the portable phone hooked up in her room to call Troy. But he was so exhausted from training for the State championship that he didn't answer. Neither did her father. Scrolling through the caller-id log she landed on the one number she knew would—and should—have an idea of how to handle the situation.

Reluctantly, Mandy pushed the “send” button and called Paige Stokum.

“Keep spraying them with this.” Paige instructed Mandy as she handed her a water bottle.

The teenager reached inside the incubator and continued to mist each creature. She watched them coil into little balls at the unexpected spritz.

As Mandy worked to keep them hydrated, Paige brought up a cutting board and knife from the kitchen. Mandy watched, impressed, as the tiny blonde's hands worked in fast-forward mode, mincing lettuce and carrots and placing them onto a plastic serving dish inside the tank she had borrowed from her office. Then she tore open a container of plain yogurt and dabbed some on her index finger.

“Okay little guy.” Paige cooed to the hatchling as she smeared the yogurt onto its mouth.

She carefully did this eleven more times until each baby iguana had been fed. Finally, she reached inside the new tank and felt the heat rock to make sure it was warm. Satisfied with the climate, Paige pulled the lid over the top of their new home and snapped it shut.

She stood up, looking ominously over the tank.

“So, now what?” Mandy was whispering, afraid to wake up the little green dragons.

“I think your brother should see this.”

Paige turned and smiled at Mandy. The teenager wanted to stay mad at the woman for imposing on their close-knit family unit, for spoiling the secret about her new relationship with Troy, for being able to read her like a book. Mostly, Mandy wanted to stay mad at Paige for always being so patient with her, even though she did everything in her power to continue to push her away.

But instead, almost instinctually, Mandy stepped forward and wrapped her free arm around the veterinarian who had saved the eggs.

It was 2am when Dirk pulled in the driveway. He was so exhausted that he didn't notice Paige's white Volvo parked on the curb out front. He could hear the TV when he came in through the garage door and crossed the kitchen. But Mandy wasn't sleeping on the couch. Assuming she'd gone up to her bedroom, Dirk made his way up the stairs and into Adam's room to kiss his son goodnight. But he wasn't there either.

Concerned that something might be wrong, he walked quickly toward Mandy's room at the other end of the hall. There was a faint light coming from underneath the door. It was similar to the light cast off from the home-made incubator only this time it appeared a little brighter.

Creeping closer to the door, Dirk slowly pushed it open and was amazed at what he saw. Three pillows were lined up side by side with a giant make-shirt bed on the floor. Even though the three heads looked familiar, the sight of them sleeping peacefully within inches of one another seemed impossible. It appeared the three of them had lined up to watch a new tank sitting on Mandy's desk and had eventually fallen asleep.

As Dirk moved closer to the glow of the tank, what he saw next was almost as shocking as the sight of Adam, Paige and Mandy snoozing together like best friends at a slumber party. He was about to kneel down to examine the baby iguanas when he heard someone wake up behind him.

"Dad?" Mandy whispered as she sat up and tried to focus her eyes.

"When did they hatch?" Dirk took a seat next to his groggy daughter leaning his back against the side of her bed.

"Probably a couple days ago." Mandy rested her head on his shoulder.

"Is that so." Dirk surveyed the room again to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

"Mmm-hmm." Mandy yawned as she answered. "Paige said sometimes it takes them a while to come out of their shell."

"Well, I'm sure glad they did." Dirk smiled to himself, taking one final look around the room before shutting his eyes.

"Me too, Dad." Mandy agreed as she drifted off to sleep again. "Me too."

Within minutes Dirk, Mandy and the twelve baby iguanas were out for the count.

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